

Mowry Brown House
Illinois Route 2
Owen Township (Rockford vic.)
Winnebago County
Illinois

HABS No. IL-303

HABS
ILL,
101-ROCKFORD,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Building Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver Colorado 80225

STATE Illinois	COUNTY Winnebago	TOWN OR VICINITY Rockford
HISTORIC NAME OF STRUCTURE (INCLUDE SOURCE FOR NAME) Mowry Brown House (see attached information)		HABS NO. IL-303
SECONDARY OR COMMON NAMES OF STRUCTURE Same		
COMPLETE ADDRESS (DESCRIBE LOCATION FOR RURAL SITES) Approximately 280' west of Illinois Route 2 and approximately 2,160' south of the intersection of Illinois Route 2 and Geddes Road, about 1/2 mile north of north boundary of Rockford, Illinois		
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE SOURCE) ca. 1840 (see attached information)	ARCHITECT(S) (INCLUDE SOURCE) Information not available.	
SIGNIFICANCE (ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL, INCLUDE ORIGINAL USE OF STRUCTURE) See attached information.		
STYLE (IF APPROPRIATE) Greek Revival		
MATERIAL OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS) Wood frame, clapboard siding, shake shingle roof, limestone and brick foundation.		
SHAPE AND DIMENSIONS OF STRUCTURE (SKETCHED FLOOR PLANS ON SEPARATE PAGES ARE ACCEPTABLE) See attached drawings.		
EXTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE See attached information.		
INTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE (DESCRIBE FLOOR PLANS, IF NOT SKETCHED) See attached.		
MAJOR ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS WITH DATES Brick replaced limestone on south foundation wall, probably in the late 19th century.		
PRESENT CONDITION AND USE Vacant. Exterior essentially intact except for ca. 10% of siding missing from south facade, which also shows a gap in brick foundation. Some window sashes missing or in poor repair. Interior:		
OTHER INFORMATION AS APPROPRIATE some flooring and plaster missing. See Attached.		
SOURCES OF INFORMATION (INCLUDE LISTING ON NATIONAL REGISTER, STATE REGISTERS, ETC.) Determined eligible for National Register February 9, 1982.		
COMPILER, AFFILIATION Jerry Jacobson - Chief of Cultural Resources Unit, Illinois Department		DATE March 5, 1985

The Mowry Brown (name of original owner/builder) house is a ca. 1840 residential building located approximately 280 feet west of Illinois Route 2 and approximately 2,610 feet south of the intersection of Illinois Route 2 and Geddes Road, which is north of the city of Rockford in Winnebago County, Illinois. This location is within the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 26 of Owen Township (T45N, R1E) and the corresponding UTM coordinates are N4689720, E328750 on the 1971 Rockford North 7.5' quadrangle map.

The structure is situated on property acquired by the State of Illinois for use in conjunction with a proposed improvement of Illinois Route 2. It was identified during a Phase I cultural resource survey of the proposed project area and is not known to have been previously represented in any existing site surveys.

It is a small, detached, nearly square, one-and-one-half story wood frame structure set on a limestone and brick foundation. It has unpainted, flush clapboard siding and wooden shake shingles. The roof is low-pitched gable-end with return cornices and full entablature. Interior walls are plaster over horizontal lath. Windows are primarily 3/3 over 3/3 sash, and the front door has six-panel side lights, a two-panel-rectangular transom light and decorated columns on either side of the door.

The main facade of the house faces the north. It is entered at ground level from the north via a door set near the east end of the facade. West of the door on the ground floor level are two large windows, both presently closed with wooden shutters. Two similar windows are located on the second floor level of the facade.

On the east side, two windows are set toward the rear of the structure on the main floor level and are similar in appearance to those on the front of the house. The west side also has two windows set toward the rear of the structure on the main floor level in addition to another large window, presently covered with wooden shutters, located toward the front of the structure on the main floor level and a small casement window set toward the rear of the house near the eaves. The rear, or south, facade has two large windows on the upper level and one on the main floor level.

The limestone and brick foundation on which the house rests is set into a south-facing incline so that only a small portion of the foundation is visible on the north side, while a full story is exposed on the south side. The foundation has small windows in the east and west walls and two larger windows in the south wall. Several alterations have been made on the south foundation wall and the limestone has been replaced with rose-colored, soft-mud brick similar to examples seen in the surviving portion of the clamp at the Brown brickyard, located across the road and to the north of the Mowry Brown house. (The foundation bricks are probably of local origin, associated with the brickyard operated by Mowry Brown and his sons during the late nineteenth century [Bateman 1916: 1007]).

The Mowry Brown house is potentially significant as an example of a small Greek Revival structure. It is apparently one of the oldest surviving structures in Winnebago County and embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Greek Revival style in a comparatively small vernacular expression. Although the main floor has partially collapsed and other interior features are in disrepair, the roof and exterior walls are intact and the exterior architectural features are in excellent condition.

In addition, the house is of potential historical significance due to its association with Mowry Brown, who was one of the earliest carpenters and homebuilders in the county and whose activities are frequently mentioned in local histories.

Mowry Brown was typical of the New Englanders who moved into northern Illinois during the 1830s. His father Joseph, a native of Rhode Island, was farming in the hilly country of Burrillville Township, near Harrisville, in the extreme northwestern part of the state when Mowry was born. Accounts of his birthdate differ. The 1877 History of Winnebago County records it as January 29, 1814 (p. 353), but an 1892 biography of Mowry's son, Richard E. Brown, gives the birthdate as December 29, 1813 (Biographical Publishing Company, 695); both dates accord with the age of 36 listed for Mowry Brown in the manuscript schedules of the 1850 census. As a youth Mowry learned both carpentry and farming. In 1834 or 1835 (again sources differ) Mowry left Providence County to join the flood of eastern youth bound for Illinois. He set himself up as a carpenter in the boom town of Alton, where he soon made the acquaintance of two people destined to have an important influence on his later life.

The first was Lucy A. Pease. Lucy was a year younger than Mowry and, like him, descended from a line of New England farmers and mechanics. She had been born near Lyons, in Wayne County, New York, close to the future route of the Erie Canal. Her grandfather, Abel Pease, had come to New York from Massachusetts at the end of the Revolutionary War, and it was in New York state that his son Ebenezer had married Pamela Wandell. Ebenezer's talents ran more to mechanics than farming and in 1834, when he, like Mowry Brown, began to hear stories of opportunity in Illinois, he herded his wife and seven children onto a canal boat and began the long journey westward. They traveled by way of the canal, the Great Lakes, and the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and settled briefly in Alton before moving on to Jersey County, Illinois. During their stay in Alton, Mowry began paying court to Lucy, and the couple were married on February 26, 1837. (Biographical Publishing Company 1892: 696).

Mowry's second acquaintance was with Dr. George Haskell. Haskell was a flamboyant Dartmouth-educated physician and an abolitionist of the hell-fire and thunder school. As a young teacher in New England, Haskell had made such an impression on his young pupil, John Greenleaf Whittier, that the poet would later immortalize Haskell, albeit anonymously, as the hero of his poem, "Snowbound." Haskell was also a businessman of some ability and a passionate advocate of education, having been one of the founders and early trustees of Shurtleff College, one of the first denominational colleges in Illinois. By 1838 Alton had begun to lose its attraction for Haskell. In August of 1837 a mob in the city had demonstrated its opinion

of abolitionists by gunning down Owen Lovejoy, and by the winter of 1837-1838 the national depression was having a severe impact on trade in the Mississippi River town. So Haskell gathered a group of friends to set out for the newly established town of Rockford. Included in this group were twenty-four-year-old Mowry Brown and his young wife. (Bateman 1916: 655).

The group chose to travel on the tiny steamboat Gipsy. The Gipsy was an open decked stern wheeler less than 100 feet long with a small cabin forward and a rather uncertain power plant. Along with the Browns and Dr. Haskell and his family were Samuel Haskell, Harvey H. Silsby, Isaiah Lyon, Caleb Blood, William Hull and eleven tons of merchandise which Dr. Haskell planned to sell in Rockford.

The journey began on the morning of April 16, 1838, with the Mississippi in full and raging flood. The Gipsy chugged its way upstream, steaming at times over what was normally dry land, and once paddling its way through a grove of trees. Landing facilities at Rock Island were primitive, consisting of a hulk tethered to the shore against which the steamboat was supposed to dock. The combination of poor docking, swift current, and a brisk east wind overtaxed the captain's skill. As he approached the landing a gust of wind caught the Gipsy's prow and pushed it out into the current which twisted the little steamboat around and slammed her twin rudders into the makeshift pier. The rudders were punched viciously against the wharf-boat, snapping the tiller ropes. The east wind

drove the unsteerable Gipsy out into the choppy waters of the Mississippi and eventually cast it up on the opposite bank at Davenport, Iowa.

Repairs were made, but when the Gipsy recrossed the river to Rock Island, Sam Haskell, Hull, and Silsby decided they had had enough of steamboating and elected to continue their journey to Rockford by land. The Browns, however, with true Yankee grit, elected to stay with Dr. Haskell and the boat. When the Gipsy returned from Galena they resumed their journey, this time up the previously untested flood waters of the Rock River.

The overland party reached Rockford without incident. A few days later the cry went up that black smoke had been seen over Corey's bluff, and the citizens of Rockford crowded the waterfront to witness the arrival of the first steamboat at their city. Once again, however, getting there proved easier than docking. No sooner would the Gipsy approach the landing stage at the foot of the rapids than the current would force the little boat back downstream. After several abortive attempts, the crew resorted to extreme measures and dipped into the lard barrel. With the heat of sizzling lard added to the flaming logs in her firebox enough steam was at last raised to push the boat up the landing stage at Platt and Stanford's store. To the cheers of the assembled crowd Mowry Brown and his companions set foot on land. (Bateman 1916: 655, Church 1900: 615).

When Brown reached Rockford a scant nine years had passed since the first European had settled in what was to become Winnebago County. On the west bank of the river there were only eighteen houses, and on the east bank scarcely more, but the new county seat was growing rapidly and there

was work for a skilled housebuilder. Mowry Brown's first project was a house for his friend and erstwhile traveling companion Dr. George Haskell. Soon after arriving he set to work with Harvey H. Silsby, William Hull, and William Harvey to construct the frame building on North Main Street. (Biographical Publishing Company 1892: 696, Bateman 1916: 653). When Haskell's house was done Mowry Brown and Harvey Silsby began work on a home for William H. Sanford. (Church 1900: 136).

Once established in trade, Brown bought an acre of land in town and built a small frame house for himself. (Biographical Publishing Company 1892: 695). About the time Brown had removed to Rockford, a daughter, Emeline, was born. She died in infancy. On June 23, 1839, a son, George S. Brown, was born. Mowry Brown looked to improve his position. In 1840 he entered a hundred and sixty acres of government land in Section 26 of what would become Owen Township. Brown earned some income from agriculture, but continued for many years to supplement his earnings by building homes and doing other carpentry work. The 1840 census taker recorded Brown in Township 44 North, Range 5 East, but this is probably in error because other sources agree that he moved directly to the site of his later home. With him were one female between 20 and 30, who would have been his wife, Lucy, one male under five, his son George S., and unidentified male between 20 and 30.

When the surviving Mowry Brown House was built is not documented, but evidence points to the early 1840s, making it one of the oldest surviving structures in Winnebago County. Mowry's son Richard later told his biographer:

He bought a log house which he moved onto his land and occupied it until able to replace it with a more comfortable edifice. (Biographical Publishing Company 1892: 695).

Richard's older brother Charles left a slightly different recollection.

"...then he entered a tract of land in what is now Owen Township, erected thereon a log cabin and made that place his home for a number of years." (Biographical Publishing Company 1892: 851).

In dating the home it should be borne in mind that the surviving building is quite small and that Mowry was a skilled carpenter and experienced home builder. The rigidly Greek Revival style of the home make it unlikely that it was built significantly later than the 1840s.

During the 1840s Mowry Brown continued to farm and do carpentry work. Markets were scarce and he was frequently forced to load his products into an oxcart and make the long journey over muddy roads to Chicago in order to find a buyer. (Biographical Publishing Company 1892: 851). In September, 1841, while Lucy was visiting relatives in Jersey County, Illinois, a second son, Charles E., was born. There followed a daughter, Mary, who would one day marry Egbert Phelps of Owen Township, a son, William, who would die at the age of twenty-one, and another son, Henry, who would eventually settle in Nebraska.

The 1850 census taker found the Brown family in improved circumstances. Mowry's real estate was valued at \$1600, not yet gentry, but more value in land than most of his Owen Township neighbors. In addition to the four sons and a daughter, there resided in the Brown house four young men: Richard

Caudell (25 years), Calvin A. Pease (22 years), Horatio Nichols (17 years), and William Copel (22 years). Although the occupation listed for these men was farmer, four hands was a substantial number for a hundred and sixty acre farm in 1850 and one is tempted to think that they may also have been helping Mowry with some of his construction projects. In addition, eighteen year old Irene Rogers was recorded as part of the Brown household.

In the following years Mowry Brown prospered. His sons went on to become prominent Winnebago County citizens and more children were born to make an eventual total of eleven. Mowry gradually gave up carpentry work to be a full time farmer. He became a member of the old settlers association, a justice of the peace, and in 1870 entered briefly into a partnership with his son Charles to make brick from clay found along Brown's creek along the north part of his farm. The 1870 census showed the 56 year old Mowry Brown with \$15,650 worth of real estate and \$3,120 worth of personal property. Living with him, in addition to Lucy, were his sons Henry A. (22 years), Fred O. (14 years) and Richard E. (11 years). His father, 81 year old Joseph, had come out from Rhode Island to spend his twilight years with his son and grandchildren. By 1877 he had 240 acres of land and was listed in the county history published that year as a Republican and a religious liberal; that is, a free thinker. (History of Winnebago County 1877: 623). Mowry Brown died in June of 1879.

ADDENDA

Chain of Title

Based upon information provided by the Winnebago County Title Company and the Chicago Title Company, Mowry Brown acquired the property by warranty deed from a Luke Joslin on 11 January 1845. The property remained in the ownership of descendants of Mowry Brown until at least 1970 (the last owner from 1970 until state acquisition of the property is not listed by the title companies).

Interior Integrity

First Floor--all remaining fabric is original except the doorway between the front parlor room and the southwest room, which is a late 19th-/early 20th-century alteration. The baseboards in the southwest room are probably not original either, as they are 3 3/4 inches wide rather than 7 3/4 inches wide as in the rest of the house. Stairway--all remaining fabric is original except that the handrails and the banisters are apparently added (visibly toe-nailed). Second floor--all remaining fabric is original.

Project Description

Under the stipulations of a memorandum of agreement among the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, the Illinois State Historic Preservation Officer, and the United States Department of Transportation, the Mowry Brown House will be moved under the general supervision of the Federal Highway Authority, Department of Transportation, from its original site to Midway Village, a facility maintained by the Rockford Park District, Rockford, Illinois. The house is being moved as part of Federal Aid Primary project 734 (Illinois Route 2) Section 77-2, Winnebago County, Illinois, which provides for construction of a four-lane highway. The

Mowry Brown house site, while it lies within the proposed right-of-way for the highway, would not be directly affected by construction activity. However, the project would leave the structure in a relatively isolated location where adequate protection against vandalism would not be feasible.

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The basic data used in the preparation of this report are taken from an unpublished draft manuscript written by William D. Walters, Jr. and Mark Esarey, under contract between the Historic Sites Division of the Midwestern Archeological Research Center at Illinois State University and the Illinois Department of Transportation.